

Lights, camera, education!

PHS students focus in on high-tech learning

Story & photo by
Hugh C. McBride

Walter Fritz's classroom is where stereotypes go to die. Visitors may enter his video production suite in the basement of Patch High School with a variety of preconceived notions about the state of American education, but a few hours with his video production students will surely set one's paradigms a-shifting.

Think today's kids are just plain lazy? That getting them out of bed is harder than prying the PlayStation out of their hands?

Watch students in Fritz's first period class get to his room before the school day starts, then count down the seconds until Danielle Grigsby and Kelsey Russell "go live" with in-house announcements broadcast to televisions throughout the school.

Convinced that the youth of today can't be trusted – that putting them in positions of power is a concession to chaos?

Sit with Fritz during a brief production meeting with eighth-grade "CNN crew" Anastacia Cale, Raven Morales and Kayla Ray – then watch as he turns them loose with a few hundred dollars worth of equipment and an assignment to record Patch Elementary students for a video that will be used by the Department of Defense Dependents' Schools Bavarian District and will eventually make its way across the ocean to Washington, D.C.

Absolutely certain that the only way to cram education into students' heads is with tireless repetition, silent attention and

perfectly-aligned rows of desks?

Well, perhaps you'd be better off renting a video of "Our Miss Brooks." Suffice it to say this isn't your grandfather's classroom.

It's probably not your big brother's, either. In the world of high-tech video production – where "ancient history" refers to the days when cell phones couldn't take pictures and music only came on discs – Fritz's students get hands-on experience with equipment and software that is truly the latest and greatest.

"If they get a job with CNN, they'll be working with some of the same equipment we have here," said Fritz, who credited an enthusiastic group of students, a supportive administration and a generous Parent-Teacher-Student Association with keeping his students equipped and current.

Combine these digital bells and whistles with a student-centered approach that is heavy on motivation, and the stage is set – literally, in the part of his room where Patch News Network is filmed – for success.

"I didn't think I'd be very good at this, but this class has given me another dream in life," said Darrin Alexander, the eighth grader who serves as PNN's weatherman.

The push toward excellence seems to be a two-way street. Fritz said he relies heavily on students such as eighth grader Brant Schultheis, who helps his teacher stay as far ahead of the learning curve as he can.

"He's a genius," Fritz said. "[Recently] we got some new software that I couldn't work. I said 'Brant, figure this out.' He did – then he taught me."



Billy Sherod keeps his eyes on a monitor while making sure that his camera is in focus for a Patch News Network broadcast. The weekly 10-minute PNN program is scripted, performed, recorded and edited by seventh and eighth grade students under the supervision of PHS teacher Walter Fritz.



Adam Taylor works the sound board during Darrin Alexander's weather report at the outset of a PNN rehearsal.



Kelsey Russell keeps her fellow PHS students informed during the morning announcements, which are broadcast live every day from Walter Fritz's classroom.